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Localism. Diversity and Community Media in San Antonio

People have been around the San Antonio region for a long, long time. Archaeologists have found man-made artifacts and trade goods over 10,000 years old. For centuries it has been a haven for gatherers and a crossroad for hunters and traders. Also known as the Alamo area, this region has been settled by 17 to 23 different ethnic groups since Spaniards occupied the territory of the Coahuiltecan Indians in the late 1600s.

When Will Rogers called San Antonio one of America's four unique cities, along with San Francisco, Boston, and New Orleans, he was referring not only to the beauty of the place, but also to a special culture that had grown out of this regions diversity. That special culture and a relaxed earthy way of life is disappearing, dissolving in the mono-culturalizing onslaught of our national mass media. We have no way to defend ourselves against this, it comes through the air.

With limited access to the broadcast media virtually most of our young media talent and crew are forced to leave town to find work and resources. No airplay equals no work and no work equals no production community. Without a healthy local production community to create localized content to help us understand ourselves, our very specific problems and solutions, we end up knowing more about the people on TV than we do about our neighbors. It's beginning to feel like the future of our special place is being invented by people who don't live here - who own our media but don't care about us as human beings, but only as numbers that they can sell to advertisers.

As a long time participant in the community media movement, I find it ironic that as the new digital media makes it possible, for the first time, to create affordable neighborhood television and radio, the wonderful new methods of distribution, created by visionary technologists, are in danger of devolving into a short sighted, hypnotic and exploitive big business shopping mall. It should be so much more.

What happened to the old public service component of broadcasting? Not only have we reached the age of automated radio, but media owners have given up any attempt at even the appearance of public service. Everyone who uses the public airwaves through cell phones, satellite service and advertising pays billions for frequencies and bandwidth, but the broadcasters who sell it to us get it for free. The payment for the use of this precious national resource was supposed to be public service to the community they serve.

Maybe, if they don't want to provide that service, broadcasters could contribute (by law, like a tax), say, 10% of their gross revenues to local, free, open and public broadcast facilities over frequencies freed up from the VHF television and space in digital AM/FM as payment in lieu of public service.

Wouldn't it be nice if:

- Independent community media groups could flourish practicing electronic arts as well as traditional music, poetry, drama, literature to be broadcast on locally controlled radio and television,
- Remote units could prowl the neighborhood of San Antonio recording music, drama, issue forums and community events.
- All over the region, community media production centers could offer San Antonio youth the chance to play with the most sophisticated media tools in turn for doing community media projects.
- Teen gangs armed with video cameras could roam the streets looking for stories about their neighborhoods instead of trouble.
- A low power radio station serving the inner city could weave regional drama, music, discussions, oral history, debates about regional policy, and documentaries into the it's format and share the best with the world through public broadband..
- The San Antonio Symphony could be broadcast on local television performing works by local composers, building a new fan base and new sources of revenue. The video could be sold through local pay per view.
- Young people in this region collaborate with young people in Iraq using a public access satellite transponder space to trade information on how to revitalize the damaged soils of the lower Rio Grande valley and the damaged soils around Basra, Iraq.

Our citizens are faced with perplexing choices about politics, the environment, the local economy and the arts. You talk to a dozen people around here and you get a dozen points of view. Being Texan, each is convinced that he or she is right. Local community production and broadcast is one way to help untangle the confusion that comes from our diversity, by enabling us to discover the unifying threads that bind us to each other and increase our ability to collaborate to solve common problems.

We must protect public spaces on the people's airways. Absentee owners focusing on the bottom line cannot know and love the people of the regions they have been given licenses to serve. The FCC should set aside 10% percent of the entire spectrum they regulate, including satellite transponder capacity, dedicated to use by local non-profit groups.

This spectrum could be designated for low power community radio and television stations, wireless broadband internet and whatever form of digital communication that may emerge in the future. When dividing up the spectrum that belongs to the public, some free space should be set aside, sort of like public parks in the information environment.

The role of government in all this is clear - to maintain the fair playing field where no voice gets left behind. Freedom of speech is about being heard. Right now the only way to express one's self to one's community is to pay large amounts of money to the media who are licensed to serve them.

Something is badly wrong here, and it will worsen with the increasing centralization of Internet access and content control by enormous media companies. Maybe the "information highway" metaphor is more correct than we think - complete with a toll both, a Highway Patrol, a book of regulations and a political correctness test prior to use under a revocable license.

10,000 years from now, what sort of culture will exist here. The technology enabled new world belongs to our children and our grandchildren. We must leave them the tools and access so that they can nourish the diversity that will give them strength. Locally controlled media with community roots and community producers offers us the best chance for us know about the place we live and raise our families. About our special place on the planet and the special responsibilities that come with it,

Pleas McNeel
7062 McCullough Ave.
San Antonio, Texas 78216
pleas@salsa.net